

Holy Monastery of Panagia Durahani (Durahaniotissa) Amfithea, Ioannina



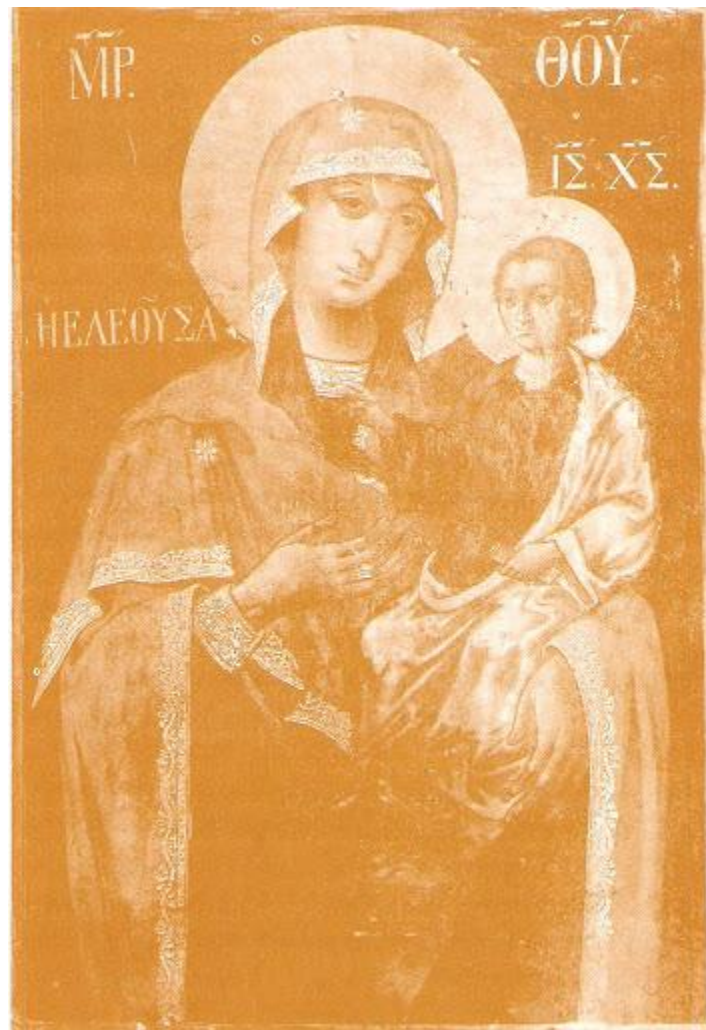
The Holy Monastery of Panagia Dourachani or Dourahani is located next to the village of Loggades on the eastern shores of Lake Pamvotis opposite Ioannina, at the foot of Mount Mitsikeli. It is dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. It is an old stone monastery, with white-hewn stone harmoniously tied to the landscape that hosts it. The courtyard is paved with old benches ready to rest the visitor. Old arbours hang from the wooden loggias of the half-ruined cells. The old cypress tree, leaning on the roof, hosts the crowds of finches in the green foliage, who chant hymns to the Virgin Mary with the chanters.

Tradition says that a Turk built the monastery of Panagia Durahani. In the place where the monastery was built, there was an iconostasis erected to the grace of the Most Holy Theotokos. In the winter of 1434, the [Beylerbeyi of Roumeli](#), Durahan Pasha, going with his army on a military campaign, passed by and lit a candle because he was of Christian parents. Then, he lost his bearings in the fog and snow and crossed with his army over the frozen lake without casualties. He realized what had happened when he stepped ashore. He continued the mission to Argyrokastro, where he won the battle and on his way back, he went to the iconostasis and built the monastery of Durahani (Durachanis) or Panagia Durahaniotissa as it is also known.

For most, this legend is the true story. According to another version, however, the founder of the monastery was not Durahan but another Turkish pasha who expanded a monastery that existed in this location. Others dissociate any phase of the monastery's construction from the sponsorship of General Durahani, arguing that the name Durahani comes from a certain Dur, possibly a junior official, who was renamed Durahan because he built an inn near the monastery. It is unknown when the Holy Monastery of Panagia Dourachani took its present form, as in 1611, the Turks destroyed the religious monuments of Epirus, due to the first revolutionary efforts of the

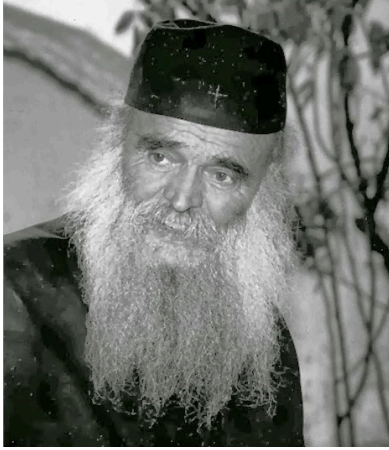
enslaved. Also, although it burned to the ground in 1825, in 1830, it was built from the foundations and continued to operate until 1933, when the monastery was looted and deserted.

The Catholicon is a simple three-aisled church with a central dome and a raised closed narthex, with walls painted full of icons and a carved wooden iconostasis, with the icon of the Virgin Mary full of offerings [tamata], causing awe and admiration to the pilgrim, who comes to embrace the holy and miraculous icon of Panagia Dourachani. There is also a complex of cells to the west, and a tall wall surrounds the Catholicon, while in an adjacent area, there is also a boarding school with great charitable contributions in the prefecture of Ioannina. It is a truly beautiful monastery whose geographical position towards the lake offers it a special and unique charm.



The Panagia of Durahani

Papathanasis: "The Monk of the People"



In recent decades, however, the monastery has become a point of reference due to the presence of the charismatic Geronda Athanasios, who gave life back to the monastery and made it a center of love and offering. "In the dilemma of whether to be close to the people or leave to a hesychasterion, the social mission prevailed. I wanted to have the joy of creation, to be close to man, to offer". Simply put, the monk, Father Athanasios, captures the mark of his big life decision as a young monk in 1974. Back then, the abandoned monastery of Panagia Durahani, which was granted to the monk, had only rocks and stones. Father Athanasios restored it with his own hands.

His will made him a handyman and gave life to the ruins, where, 32 years ago, "Anthos," a non-profit charitable foundation, sprouted. It is a boarding school-shelter, a primary school and a secondary school, operating with much effort but strong will, on a site next to the monastery, offering warmth and care to children aged 6 to 18. There are also libraries, reading rooms and recreational rooms on the premises. Hundreds of people in need find food, sleep, education, affection and love there. The hagiography workshop, the radio station and the folklore museum maximize the work of the monastery's people, who are none other than the volunteer associates of the Geronda who have dedicated their lives to giving and loving their fellow man.

The Geronda of Durahani, on the opposite bank of Pamvotida, facing the mosques of the castle of Ioannina, built this small but great in symbolism, society of offering, volunteerism and love. Teachers, professors, workers, cooks, and ordinary citizens offer their services tirelessly daily; their social work reaches even the detention facilities of the Ioannina Police Department, as they daily provide food for the prisoners.

Father Athanasios, born Sotiris Chatzis, was born in mountainous Vovoussa in Eastern Zagori (in 1933). He said he was illiterate, but with the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, he was able to read first the Bible and then all the church books.

He did not attend primary or secondary school because, during the interwar period, his village operated schools with Romanian teachers, and he refused to attend class. In fact, he had aroused other children from the village not to go to Romanian school and went to the forest every day, as he recounts. "In Vovoussa, we were divided. We are Vlach-speaking, and they said we should go to study at the Romanian school that started operating in our village. I reacted like a beast. When World War II ended, I was 12 out of 13. Then, a Greek school operated for only 25 days because

the civil war had started and stopped. The children loved me very much; we left the village in the forest until the end of the civil war."

The Elder remembers dark days. In Gyftokampos, Zagori witnessed an incident that remains vivid in his memory: "I saw a soldier, who a rebel was watching. When the guerrilla killed the soldier and went to see him, he saw his brother dead and committed suicide."

In the forest, near other villagers, he learned the art of woodcutter and started working in a family business.

But a vision changed his life forever. "Until I was 18 years old, I was walking around outside the churches, making the sign of the cross, not listening to God. I was bedridden with acute rheumatism for three months. I got very sick and came to Ioannina. One day, as I was lying in my uncle's storeroom, I heard a voice. The Holy Spirit will visit you. I saw a flickering candle lit, and from then on, I gained such strength and courage you can't imagine. I announced to the family, to my brothers and sisters, that I was giving them my share of the business, and I left. I rented two houses to take in children in need. I tried to help poor students I knew to study and find shelter for the night."

According to the monk, he worked two or three jobs daily to provide the children with food and shelter. "I started picking up kids who couldn't even afford to play; I rented a room for them to play and read. In a house with 2 rooms and kitchen, I put 6 children. One night, when I went to see what they were doing, their sheets were full of bed bugs. Then we left immediately and went to another place the next day." These children became great scientists and entrepreneurs, but they never forgot the man who took care of them. Today, they give a helping hand and support to the social work of Father Athanasios, whom they love and respect.

In 1970, an auxiliary bishop in Ioannina urged Sotiris Hatzis to become a monk, recognizing his desire. He became a monk on September 26, 1970. He was then ordained a deacon on November 11, 1970 and, the following year, a priest (June 28, 1972). Initially, he was granted the monastery of Agios Ioannis Prodromos and then Panagia Durahani. The monastery celebrates on September 8th, and many people from all over Epirus and Northern Greece visit it for pilgrimage.



In 1974, he was granted the abandoned Monastery of Panagia of Durahani in Ioannina. In the same years, icons were stolen. He entered the courtyard, lifted the scapular, and said, "My Panagia, help me; I have nothing, you know." Father Athanasius raised him with his hands. Every day, he celebrated the Divine Liturgy.

The place was restored with the care of the Virgin Mary. The sweat takes hold. The ruins become walls and rooms. The pure earth, full of stones, works its miracle.

The Elder Falls Asleep in the Lord

On November 26, 2021, he passed away at the age of 89. Papa Thanasis was diagnosed positive for coronavirus and was hospitalized at the Covid Clinic of Hadjikota General Hospital in Ioannina. Due to his already failing health, despite the efforts of the doctors of the hospital, the elder did not make it.



The Statement of the Bishop of Ioannina

In a statement on the death of the elder Athanasios, the Metropolitan of Ioannina Maximos said:

"Hieromonk Athanasios Hatzis was perhaps the most emblematic personality of Ioannina. He was a man who sacrificed his life for the ministry of God and the ministry of people. Father Athanasios identified his life with the protection of poor and orphaned children, and for half a century, he did everything he could to help these children learn to read and write and live with dignity. He deprived himself to help those who were deprived to find their way. He chose the path of solitary hesychia, but he worked ceaselessly in sacred anxiety to comfort the souls of the people who took refuge in his epitrachelion (stole) and those who were in need. He preached the word of the Gospel, but most of all, he put it into practice! His favourite

suggestion, "Believe, love, forgive and move on with your life," has always been his daily practice.

His work is enormous, without personal promotion and without fanfare. He taught in practice the ministry of neighbour but also humility. This work must continue since the needs he served have not ceased to exist.

With the certainty that he has pleased God and men, we propel him to eternity, where he will continue to minister to Man with his pure prayer.

May his memory be eternal, and may we always have his prayer."



Archieratical Divine Liturgy and memorial service for the late Father Athanasios were celebrated on the completion of one year since his death in the Lord.